

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

ERNEST JACK HILL, III,	:	Civil No. 3:10-CV-1743
	:	
Petitioner,	:	(Judge Kosik)
	:	
v.	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
	:	
HARLEY LAPPIN, et al.,	:	
	:	
Respondents.	:	

**MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER**

**I. Statement of Facts and of the Case**

The petitioner in this case, Ernest Jack Hill, II, is a federal inmate housed at the United States Penitentiary, Canaan. On August 19, 2010, Hill filed a *pro se* complaint in mandamus against the defendants, his jailers. In this complaint Hill alleged that he suffers from panic attacks in prison. According to Hill prison officials have failed to provide him with immediate access to a qualified psychiatrist to treat these panic attacks, and have failed to prescribe clinically appropriate medications for him to treat this condition.

Hill's 113-page *pro se* complaint is accompanied by voluminous exhibits detailing some 20 separate medical evaluations of Hill's panic attacks conducted by staff at U.S.P. Canaan over an eight month period between September 2009 and May

2010. Despite this thoroughly documented history of health care set forth in his pleadings, Hill still seeks to invoke a venerable form of judicial relief, a writ of mandamus, to compel a specific course of treatment for his panic attacks. Having examined the plaintiff's complaint we are notifying the plaintiff that many of these allegations are subject to dismissal and are directing the plaintiff to file an amended complaint for the reasons set forth below.

## **II. Discussion**

### **A. Inmate Case Screening Standard of Review**

This Court has a statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints which seek redress against government officials. Specifically, we are obliged to review the complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A which provides, in pertinent part:

**(a) Screening.** - The court shall review, before docketing, if feasible or, in any event, as soon as practicable after docketing, a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity.

**(b) Grounds for dismissal.** - On review, the court shall identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, if the complaint-

(1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or

(2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

Under Section 1915A, the Court must assess whether a *pro se* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has recently aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips [v. County of Allegheny], 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)] and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the Court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn therefrom are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O’Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald

assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id. In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court recently underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, \_\_\_ U.S. \_\_\_, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 1950. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 1949. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 1950.

Thus, a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a *pro se* plaintiff's complaint must recite factual allegations which are sufficient to raise the plaintiff's claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a "plausible claim for relief." In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to "show" such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

Applying this standard, the Court places the plaintiff on notice that many of the allegations in the *pro se* complaint may be subject to dismissal for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.

**B. Hill May Not be Entitled to Mandamus Relief**

At the outset, it appears that Hill may not be entitled to mandamus relief. A petition for writ of mandamus is an ancient form of common law judicial relief, a request for a court order compelling a public official to perform some legally-mandated duty. The power of federal courts to issue writs of mandamus is now defined in a federal statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1361, which provides that:

The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of any action in the nature of mandamus to compel an officer or employee of the United States or any agency thereof to perform a duty owed to the plaintiff.

28 U.S.C.. § 1361.

Writs of mandamus compelling government officials to take specific actions, are extraordinary forms of relief, which must comply with demanding legal standards. Thus, it is well-settled that “The writ is a drastic remedy that ‘is seldom issued and its use is discouraged.’ ” In re Patenaude, 210 F.3d 135, 140 (3d Cir. 2000), (quoting Lusardi v. Lechner, 855 F.2d 1062, 1069 (3d Cir. 1988)). Thus, as a general rule:

There are two prerequisites to issuing a writ of mandamus. [Petitioners] must show that (1) they have no other adequate means to attain their desired relief; and (2) their right to the writ is clear and indisputable. See In re Patenaude, 210 F.3d 135, 141 (3d Cir.2000); Aerosource, Inc. v. Slater, 142 F.3d 572, 582 (3d. 1988).

Hinkel v. England, 349 F.3d 162, 164 (3d Cir. 2003).

Moreover, “[m]andamus is an extraordinary remedy that can only be granted where a

legal duty 'is positively commanded and so plainly prescribed as to be free from doubt.' ” Appalachian States Low-Level Radioactive Waste Comm'n v. O'Leary, 93 F.3d 103, 112 (3d Cir.1996) (quoting Harmon Cove Condominium Ass'n, Inc. v. Marsh, 815 F.2d 949, 951 (3d Cir.1987)). See Ararat v. District Director, ICE, 176 F.App'x. 343 (3d Cir. 2006). Therefore:

Mandamus “is intended to provide a remedy for a plaintiff only if he has exhausted all other avenues of relief and only if the defendant owes him a clear nondiscretionary duty.” Heckler v. Ringer, 466 U.S. 602, 616, 104 S.Ct. 2013, 80 L.Ed.2d 622 (1984) (discussing the common-law writ of mandamus, as codified in 28 U.S.C. § 1361). See also Stehney, 101 F.3d at 934 (mandamus relief is a drastic remedy only to be invoked in extraordinary circumstances).

Stanley v. Hogsten 277 F.App'x. 180, 181(3d Cir. 2008).

As one court has aptly observed when describing the precise and exacting standards which must be met when a petitioner invokes the writ of mandamus:

The remedy of mandamus “is a drastic one, to be invoked only in extraordinary circumstances.” Allied Chemical Corp. v. Daiflon, Inc., 449 U.S. 33, 34,(1980). Only “exceptional circumstances amounting to a judicial ‘usurpation of power’ ” will justify issuance of the writ. Gulfstream Aerospace Corp. v. Mayacamas Corp., 485 U.S. 271, 289 (1988) (quoting Will v. United States, 389 U.S. 90, 95(1967)); see also In re Leeds, 951 F.2d 1323, 1323 (D.C.Cir.1991). Mandamus is available only if: “(1) the plaintiff has a clear right to relief; (2) the defendant has a clear duty to act; and (3) there is no other adequate remedy available to plaintiff.” In re Medicare Reimbursement Litigation, 414 F.3d 7, 10 (D.C.Cir.2005) (quoting Power v. Barnhart, 292 F.3d 781, 784 (D.C.Cir.2002)); see also Banks v. Office of Senate Sergeant-At-Arms and Doorkeeper of the United States Senate, 471 F.3d 1341, 1350

(D.C.Cir.2006) (concluding that the extraordinary remedy of mandamus need not issue in a case arising under the Congressional Accountability Act where the issue could be addressed by an appeal from a final judgment). The party seeking mandamus “has the burden of showing that ‘its right to issuance of the writ is clear and indisputable.’ ” Power v. Barnhart, 292 F.3d at 784 (quoting Northern States Power Co. v. U.S. Dep’t of Energy, 128 F.3d 754, 758 (D.C.Cir.1997)). Where the action petitioner seeks to compel is discretionary, petitioner has no clear right to relief and mandamus therefore is not an appropriate remedy. See, e.g., Heckler v. Ringer, 466 U.S. 602, 616, 104 S.Ct. 2013, 80 L.Ed.2d 622 (1984); Weber v. United States, 209 F.3d at 760 (“[M]andamus is proper only when an agency has a clearly established duty to act.”).

Carson v. U.S. Office of Special Counsel, 534 F.Supp.2d 103, 105 (D.D.C.2008).

In the past, petitioners, like Hill, have frequently turned to the writ of mandamus to try to compel components of the United States Department of Justice to take some specific action. These petitions have been many and varied in their forms, embracing wildly diverse disputes, but one consistent theme throughout these cases has been that the courts rarely such embrace mandamus requests. See e.g., Priskanin v. Doe, 349 F.App’x 689 (3d Cir. 2009)(denying mandamus request that FBI protect former alleged informant); Stanley v. Hogsten, 277 F.App’x. 180, 181(3d Cir.2008) (denying federal inmate mandamus request for law book); Ararat v. District Director, ICE, 176 F.App’x. 343 (3d Cir. 2006)(denying prisoner mandamus request to remove detainer); Beckley v. Miner, 125 F.App’x 385 (2d Cir. 2005)(denying mandamus request for prison transfer); Leonhard v. Mitchell, 473 F.2d 709 (2d Cir. 1973)(denying mandamus request for disclosure of whereabouts of witness protection program witness); Sloan



v. Troung, 573 F.Supp.2d 823 (S.D.N.Y. 2008)(denying mandamus request for Department of Justice to intervene in Chess Board election); Saini v. Heinauer, 552 F.Supp.2d 974 (D.Neb. 2008)(denying mandamus request to order FBI to expedite fingerprint processing of petitioner, an applicant for naturalization); Carson v. U.S. Office of Special Counsel, 534 F.Supp.2d 103,105 (D.D.C.2008) (denying mandamus petition to compel the Office of Special Counsel to prepare and produce a report). These cases, which consistently decline to apply the drastic and extraordinary remedy of mandamus, all recognize that the work of the Department of Justice routinely entails the exercise of discretion by government officials. Since the decisions made by Department of Justice officials often entail significant exercises of discretion, it rarely can be said that these judgments involve such “a clear nondiscretionary duty,” Stanley v. Hogsten 277 F.App’x. at 181, that mandamus may lie compelling some specific form of governmental action. Similarly, federal courts have rarely found that a writ of mandamus is the proper legal prescription for dictating to prison officials the manner in which they should provide mental health care to inmates. See e.g., Miller v. Lappin, No. 09-12, 2009 WL 166873 (W.D. Va. Jan. 26, 2009)(denying mandamus); Barnhill v. Cherry, No. 06-922, 2008 WL 759322 (M.D. Fla. March 20, 2008)(denying mandamus); United States v. McAllister, 969 F.Supp. 1200 (D. Minn. 1997)(denying mandamus).

In this case, Hill’s complaint in mandamus appears to invite this court, in the guise of a mandamus action, to direct a specific course of mental health treatment for Hill’s panic attacks. A writ of mandamus may only issue if the plaintiff has a clear right to relief and the defendant has a clear duty to act, and “can only be granted where a legal duty ‘is positively commanded and so plainly prescribed as to be free from doubt.’ ” Appalachian States Low-Level Radioactive Waste Comm’n v. O’Leary, 93 F.3d 103, 112 (3d Cir.1996). Therefore, inherent in a request for mandamus is “a showing [by the moving party] that ‘its right to issuance of the writ is clear and indisputable.’ ” Where the action petitioner seeks to compel is discretionary, petitioner has no clear right to relief and mandamus therefore is not an appropriate remedy.” Carson v. U.S. Office of Special Counsel, 534 F.Supp.2d 103, 105 (D.D.C.2008). Since Hill’s complaint, at bottom, seeks to use a writ of mandamus to dictate the exercise of discretion in the mental health treatment provided to an inmate, this request to compel particular mental health care by writ is inappropriate and must be denied. See e.g., Miller v. Lappin, *supra*; Barnhill v. Cherry, *supra*; United States v. McAllister, *supra*.

**C. Hill’s Petition May Not State a Valid Eighth Amendment Claim**

In addition, Hill faces an exacting burden in advancing an Eighth Amendment claim against prison officials in their individual capacities based upon an alleged failure to adequately treat his panic attacks.. To sustain such a claim, Hill must plead facts which:

[M]eet two requirements: (1) “the deprivation alleged must be, objectively, sufficiently serious;” and (2) the “prison official must have a sufficiently culpable state of mind.” Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 834, 114 S.Ct. 1970, 128 L.Ed.2d 811 (1994) (quotation marks and citations omitted). In prison conditions cases, “that state of mind is one of ‘deliberate indifference’ to inmate health or safety.” Id. “Deliberate indifference” is a subjective standard under Farmer-the prison official-defendant must actually have known or been aware of the excessive risk to inmate safety.

Beers-Capitol v. Whetzel 256 F.3d 120, 125 (3d Cir. 2001).

By including a subjective intent component in this Eighth Amendment benchmark, the courts have held that a mere generalized knowledge that prisons are dangerous places does not give rise to an Eighth Amendment claim. See Jones v. Beard, 145 F. App’x 743 (3d Cir. 2005). Furthermore, with respect to Eighth Amendment claims premised on inadequate medical treatment, in the medical context a constitutional violation under the Eighth Amendment occurs only when state officials are deliberately indifferent to an inmate's serious medical needs. Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 105 (1976). To establish a violation of his constitutional right to adequate medical care in accordance with this standard, a plaintiff is required to point to evidence that

demonstrates (1) a serious medical need, and (2) acts or omissions by prison officials that indicate deliberate indifference to that need. Rouse v. Plantier, 182 F.3d 192, 197 (3d Cir. 1999).

Deliberate indifference to a serious medical need involves the “unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.” Estelle, 429 U.S. at 104. Such indifference may be evidenced by an intentional refusal to provide care, delayed provision of medical treatment for non-medical reasons, denial of prescribed medical treatment, denial of reasonable requests for treatment that results in suffering or risk of injury, Durmer v. O’Carroll, 991 F.2d 64, 68 (3d Cir. 1993), or “persistent conduct in the face of resultant pain and risk of permanent injury,” White v. Napoleon, 897 F.2d 103, 109 (3d Cir. 1990).

However, it is also clear that the mere misdiagnosis of a condition or medical need, or negligent treatment provided for a condition, is not actionable as an Eighth Amendment claim because medical malpractice is not a constitutional violation. Estelle, 429 U.S. at 106. “Indeed, prison authorities are accorded considerable latitude in the diagnosis and treatment of prisoners.” Durmer, 991 F.2d at 67 (citations omitted). Furthermore, in a prison medical context, deliberate indifference is generally not found when some significant level of medical care has been offered to the inmate. Clark v. Doe, 2000 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14999, 2000 WL 1522855, at \*2 (E.D.Pa. Oct.

13, 2000)(“courts have consistently rejected Eighth Amendment claims where an inmate has received some level of medical care”). Thus, such complaints fail as constitutional claims since “the exercise by a doctor of his professional judgment is never deliberate indifference. See e.g. Brown v. Borough of Chambersburg, 903 F.2d 274, 278 (3d Cir.1990) (‘[A]s long as a physician exercises professional judgment his behavior will not violate a prisoner's constitutional rights.’)”. Gindraw v. Dendler, 967 F.Supp. 833, 836 (E.D. Pa. 1997). Applying this exacting standard, courts have frequently rejected Eighth Amendment claims that are based upon the level of professional care that an inmate received; see, e.g., Ham v. Greer, 269 F. App’x 149 (3d Cir. 2008); James v. Dep’t of Corrections, 230 F. App’x 195 (3d Cir. 2007); Gillespie v. Hogan, 182 F. App’x 103 (3d Cir. 2006); Bronson v. White, No. 05-2150, 2007 WL 3033865 (M.D. Pa. Oct. 15, 2007); Gindraw v. Dendler, 967 F.Supp. 833 (E.D. Pa. 1997), particularly where it can be shown that significant medical services were provided to the inmate but the prisoner is dissatisfied with the outcome of these services. Instead, courts have defined the precise burden which an inmate must sustain in order to advance an Eighth Amendment claim against a healthcare professional premised on allegedly inadequate care, stating that:

The district court [may] properly dis[miss an] Eighth Amendment claim, as it concerned [a care giver], because [the] allegations merely amounted to a disagreement over the proper course of his treatment and thus failed to allege a reckless disregard with respect to his . . . care. The standard

for cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment, established by the Supreme Court in Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 104 (1976), and its progeny, has two prongs: 1) deliberate indifference by prison officials and 2) serious medical needs. “It is well-settled that claims of negligence or medical malpractice, without some more culpable state of mind, do not constitute ‘deliberate indifference.’ ” “Nor does mere disagreement as to the proper medical treatment support a claim of an eighth amendment violation.” . . . . [The inmate] alleged no undue delay in receiving treatment and, as the district court noted, the evidence he presented established that he received timely care . . . . Although [an inmate plaintiff] may have preferred a different course of treatment, [t]his preference alone cannot establish deliberate indifference as such second-guessing is not the province of the courts.

James, 230 F.App’x. at 197-198(citations omitted).

In short, in the context of the Eighth Amendment, any attempt to second-guess the propriety or adequacy of a particular course of treatment is disavowed by courts since such determinations remain a question of sound professional judgment. Inmates of Allegheny County Jail v. Pierce, 612 F.2d 754, 762 (3d Cir. 1979). In this case, without the inclusion of some further well-pleaded factual allegations, the assertions made here appear to be little more than “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, [which as a legal matter] do not suffice.” Ashcroft v. Iqbal, supra 127 S.Ct. at 1979. Moreover, Hill’s petition recites 20 medical treatment appointments which he received with health care professionals in prison, health care providers who have endeavored to address his psychiatric complaints.

In its current form this petition is flawed in one fundamental respect. While he complains that medical staff have been deliberately indifferent to his medical needs, Hill's petition actually documents in detail extensive treatment which this inmate has received over the past 8 months. Where such treatment is evident from the record, and where an inmate's dispute in essence entails nothing more than a disagreement between an inmate and doctors over alternate treatment plans, the inmate's complaint will fail as a constitutional claim; see e.g., Gause v. Diguglielmo, 339 F.App'x 132 (3d Cir. 2009)(dispute over choice of medication does not rise to the level of an Eighth Amendment violation); Innis v. Wilson, 334 F.App'x 454 (3d Cir. 2009)(same); Rozzelle v. Rossi, 307 F.App'x 640 (3d Cir. 2008)(same); Whooten v. Bussanich, 248 F.App'x 324 (3d Cir. 2007)(same); Ascenzi v. Diaz, 247 F.App'x 390 (3d Cir. 2007)(same), since "the exercise by a doctor of his professional judgment is never deliberate indifference."

We recognize, however, that in civil rights cases *pro se* petitioners often should be afforded an opportunity to amend a complaint before the complaint is dismissed in its entirety, See Fletcher-Hardee Corp. v. Pote Concrete Contractors, 482 F.3d 247, 253 (3d Cir. 2007), unless granting further leave to amend would be futile or result in undue delay. Alston v. Parker, 363 F.3d 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2004). Since the *pro se* complaint in mandamus may not contain sufficient factual recitals to state a claim upon

which relief may be granted, or otherwise may seek relief which cannot be afforded to Hill, the petitioner is placed on notice that these allegations may be subject to dismissal under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, and Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

### **III. Conclusion**

The Court will, however, provide Hill with an opportunity to correct the deficiencies identified in the *pro se* complaint, and avoid the possible sanction of dismissal of claims. Accordingly, **IT IS ORDERED** that the plaintiff shall file an amended complaint on or before **September 10, 2010**. Any amended complaint shall be complete in all respects, and should address the issues raised by this Order. It shall be a new pleading which stands by itself as an adequate complaint without reference to the complaint already filed. Any amended complaint shall be titled as an amended complaint and shall contain the docket number of this case. If Hill fails to file an amended complaint by **September 10, 2010**, the Court will assume that the petitioner cannot provide further well-pleaded facts in support of this complaint, and will make appropriate recommendations regarding whether the complaint should be dismissed, for failure to prosecute by complying with this Court's order or for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.



*S/Martin C. Carlson*

Martin C. Carlson

United States Magistrate Judge

Dated: August 25, 2010.